



Talking technology: Congressman Ellsworth gets look at educational needs

By Sue Loughlin
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— On Monday, Terre Haute South Vigo High School junior Amber Bailey had an opportunity to explain her interest in machining to 8th District Congressman Brad Ellsworth.

The congressman toured the school's Career and Technical Education programs.

Bailey showed him how she used some high-tech machinery — a Haas CNC Mill — to make a Chevy emblem from a piece of aluminum. She finished it before he left and gave it to him.

Ellsworth asked her how she got interested in technology and machining. At first, she said, she thought it would be hard, "but once I was introduced to technology, I grew into it."

In recent years, the school district has made significant investments in Career and Technical Education programs at South, North Vigo and West Vigo high schools.

With updated machines and new technology, students have been able to perform project-based learning with equipment that is found in local industry.

The equipment is expensive, says Doug Dillion, the school district's director of career and technical education.

One Haas CNC (Computer Numerical Controlled) Mill costs \$38,000, he said. The school district recently purchased two mills and one lathe for each high school, using bond refinancing money.

The school also has a 3-D rapid prototyper, a machine that can print out 3-D objects. It costs \$30,000. All three high schools have it.

Dillion recently visited Ellsworth in Washington, D.C., and told him about the need for more federal money to maintain up-to-date technology programs. On Monday, Ellsworth had the opportunity to see the programs first-hand.

Dillion emphasized the importance of increasing federal Perkins funding, which the school district can use to purchase machines and up-to-date technology for those programs. The funding has been flatlined for several years, and former President George Bush didn't want to renew the program.

With a new president in the White House, "We're really pushing for that money to be increased," Dillion said after Ellsworth's tour.

Dillion also hopes that some of the federal stimulus money will be available for the career/technical education programs, although that remains unclear.

Perkins funds "used to be our primary source of funding for the school district to buy modernized equipment and also to do professional development on new technology," Dillion said. Now, it's a supplementary source. In 2003-04, the school district received \$385,445 in Perkins funding. In 2007-08, the amount was \$309,507. This year, it's expected to be about \$345,684.

Federal funding hasn't increased much through the years, but machines keep getting more expensive, Dillion said.

In recent years, the School Board generously agreed to use bond refinancing money to upgrade technology machinery, said John Newport, assistant curriculum coordinator for career and technical education. That was one-time money, however.

To keep the machinery and programs up-to-date, "We need increases in Perkins and federal help," Newport said.

It's important to have updated equipment because "you have to teach students on machines that are at least

similar to what they'll see in industry," Dillion said.

As Ellsworth walked from classroom to classroom at South, he saw many examples of students using up-to-date machinery. "I was born too early," he said.

Ellsworth said programs such as those at South will be important in turning around the nation's economy and strengthening its manufacturing sector. Also, students who take those programs will be better prepared to enter both the workforce and higher education.

"It helps me make my decisions back in D.C. on funding issues and where we need to go with our education system," Ellsworth said. He intends to advocate for greater funding to assist programs such as those he saw at South.

Ellsworth said he wasn't sure if there was specific stimulus money dedicated to career/technical education. "I have to look at it," he said.

He also agrees the Perkins program needs greater funding levels. "If we're going to turn this economy around, education really is the key to it," he said.

South student Luke Vaccaro, who was in a robotics class, also had an opportunity to talk with Ellsworth. The class is building a robot.

Vaccaro, who wants to go into engineering or architecture, said South's career/technical programs "are pretty good. They have a lot of stuff to offer," he said.

As Ellsworth left South, he wanted someone to tell Amber Bailey he planned to put her Chevy emblem on his desk in Washington.

The school district's updated equipment has provided new interest in the evening Workforce Development program. Through a partnership with Work One Western Indiana, classes are being offered to adults (18 or older) in the evening at no cost to those enrolled.

The classes were developed using local industry input and regional workforce data to determine the skills necessary for dislocated workers to be retrained and re-enter the workforce.

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